

The worst part was watching their father go, the way he meandered unaware down the spiraling mental path that had started so innocuously, with things misplaced here and there, that over time ended in a tornado of confusion and contempt as his body was ravaged by his mind.

He was never prepared to fight such a hard fought and ugly battle. No one could've trained him to cope with the hate that he would suddenly feel.

As he ranted and flailed his way through anger, only his eyes watered at the realization of the monster he'd become.

Huddled around the coffee table and listening in vain to the sheets of rain that dotted the roof and drummed off of the windowpanes, the children tried to not think about his booming voice. It shot around the house and echoed off of the walls, his cancerous comments entering their ears as they fell hard from two floors above. He ranted with no reason or direction. His mouth was like a stripped faucet, unable to hold anything in.

He was their dad.

No one diagnosed him with anything in particular, and no one batted an eye when his personality went from tempered to temperamental. Everyone, including his physician, just chalked it up to stress, mental discomfort that would go away with time.

It was their mother who had known, from the promising spring days with the smells of flowers and refreshing showers, to the dark winter nights when the rain and slushy snow blanketed the city in a dull claustrophobic blanket, that he changed daily, like the weather.

She stood watching as her husband faded from view, remembering how one-day, years ago, his face and body had shone with a color and intensity that was so vivid, leaving no question that he was right in front of her. But over time, he grew blurry and out of focus. He was there, but the way his everything faded into the background and made him blend in worried her. He wasn't the blending in type. He was supposed to stick out, but not in the way he was becoming.

It startled the kids the way their mother went about her business as their father ranted in circles as they all stood near, how she ignored him without batting an eye.

They didn't understand her struggle, her desire to keep a brave face in front of the children, to carry on burdened so the kids wouldn't have to.

And it ate her from the inside, her own personal disease that would never get diagnosed.

The eldest kids, Justine and Chad, worried the most. Torn between the pull of leaving the house and the dedication to the family and its preservation, they wanted so badly to leave and get on with getting older, but more than those desires they feared most what they would leave behind. Michael and Chris couldn't be left on their own to fend for themselves in the swift tide of their father's polar discomfort and raging seas.

There was no leaving the stormy house. They all knew this.

Watching his father fall apart was the hardest on Chad, who all his life had lived in the dream of one day being like his father. Watching him crumble was almost like realizing that everything in the past had been a lie, how all that he'd strived for and all the lessons he'd learnt were for not. It took his mother to pull him aside to tell him that he was the man of the house now, how his father, his siblings, and even his mother needed Chad to be strong, to look out for the younger kids, and to be the one who could buffer their dad when he got too big for the tempest that raged deep down inside his miss-wired mind.

But on that rainy windy night, as the children sat around the coffee table in the living room, each focusing on homework and daydreams and trying to ignore their dad's storm, they knew that the atmosphere surrounding their dad felt different than any other day.

Earlier, as they ate dinner, they had heard a warning about northern outflow winds, how

they had been pummeling down the coast with a blind quick-freezing furry, their gusts bearing down on the normally mild Vancouver area, leaving a path of destruction and bone chilling temperatures in their wake.

The warnings confused the kids, watching as the rain continued to fall outside. But no one focused too long on the weather, as their dad raged louder and louder as the day wore on, he had never been this bad.

There was a crash somewhere in the rooms above, then running guilty footsteps followed by the slam of a door.

They went to the window, and watched with tears in their eyes as their dad ran shouting down the sidewalk, his shoeless feet sloshing in puddles in a confused dash. He didn't run straight as he continued on, but darted left and right as if in doubt, forgetting his misgivings as quickly as they'd come. He looked completely unconvinced of where he was going or what he was doing, but he did so at such a pace that it looked like his body was trying to will his mind into quickly realizing what was going on, to take stock of the absurdity of the situation, and to go somewhere where he could get the help that he needed.

Looking around for their mother, the kids heard nothing as they searched the house, looking for her and a clue to what had happened. In the bathroom they gazed at the broken mirror that littered the sink and floor. There was blood everywhere in little trails. The sound of the car backing out of the driveway, making its getaway quickly. Maybe their mom was going to look for him, or maybe she needed some time alone. No one was sure.

Chad took the lead as he started to clean up after his father, fighting the choking feeling that clutched at his throat and the emotions that welled up inside of him. He had to be strong; everyone needed him to be strong.

That's what his mom said anyway.

Justine was the first to notice the hum of the wind, how it rattled the windows and made the house moan. They huddled around the front window and watched the wind clutching at the trees and rattling their branches with ease. It didn't take long for the rain to turn to snow, the temperature dropping so quickly that the people who went outside to take in the storm were all caught unaware, slipping on the icy sidewalks that suddenly shone with a glittering beauty that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Within an hour there was a plea on the radio from city officials, begging people to stay inside, how it was only going to get colder, how the deep freeze would continue to blanket the city in a mind numbing coldness. And they worried about their father, where he was, what was happening to him, the picture in their minds all too clear, seeing him running in boxer shorts and socks. It chilled them more than the frigid room they stood in.

"I have to go and look for him," Chad blurted out, not looking at anyone as he spoke, "he's gonna die out there."

No one said anything as Chad bundled up, mumbling incoherently as he piled layer upon layer of clothes over his thin frame. But one by one, as they watched Chad get dressed, the other three did the same, knowing that they had to do this together, that it wasn't fair for Chad to be the one who had to go and pick up their father's pieces.

Stepping out of the house, their eyes quickly ached and their breath plumed. They were startled by the complete coldness that they stood in. It hurt to breathe, with chest aching gasps, and it seemed strange that only hours earlier, it had been warm and rainy, a typical winter day.

They started walking, ignoring the curious glances from warmly lit living rooms. They

trudged headlong into the blistering wind, their bodies battered by horizontal snow that etched lines into their young pink faces.

Chris could feel the drool in the corner of his mouth freeze, cracking his skin as it quickly solidified, hurting as he tried to talk.

“Holy shit, I’ve never been so cold...”

But his words didn’t reach his siblings, with the way the wind pushed his sentence and scattered its meanings into a jumbled puzzle that flew over everyone’s heads. No one knew that he had said anything at all.

They walked without talking in circular patterns, from block to block they fanned out, trying to think about all the places their dad would go. An hour from home, they tried without success to ignore the police car as it idled up beside them, the driver’s voice pleading with them to get home, where it was safe and warm.

“HEY KIDS,” the officer shouted, “WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUTSIDE? YOU’LL CATCH PNEUMONIA!”

And it was Chad who once again took the lead. He walked up to the car window and explained that they were looking for their dog that would probably die if they didn’t find him. No one objected when the police officer radioed the other officers in the area to keep an eye out for the dog.

Deep down, they all knew it was wrong, but they didn’t want him to know, and lying to the cop seemed the only way to make him go away. They didn’t want help. It was too personal for anyone other than the family.

“We’ll find him sir,” Michael said, the sound of near pleading surfacing in his crackling words, “it won’t be that long now.”

“Ok, but if I see you kids again,” the officer responded, “I’ll take you home myself.”

Just as their bodies threatened to give out from fear and cold, they came to the park that had been there for all of them. It had been a hub that the children had known and grown up with. It was weird how different the park looked, as it lay vacant with tree branches and neighborhood garbage strewn all over the place as the wind continued to scrub everything from the ground. It looked like war zone, and not the place that they all thought of with fond hearts.

There in the middle of all memories, Chris saw his father first, his shape huddled on the swing, his body buffeted by the wind that darted across the open green space. His head wilted at an awkward angle, leaning against the chain that held the swing in place, and as the kids ran up to his lifeless body, they were faced with his open staring eyes. They were frozen over, stuck in a moment of time that had long passed.

“DAD, DAAAAD...” Michael screamed, “DAD... COME ON!”

There was no response as his gaze carried onward. Straight-ahead his eyes focused, the pain inside obvious, even in the cold.

Justine reached for his hands, both frozen in place to the chain links that crackled as the swing suddenly moved. He felt dead.

As they tried to move him from his perch on the swing, they didn’t heed anymore the temperature that continued to drop, nor did they notice the lights of the police car and ambulance that had quickly followed their entrance into the park.

In front of their dad, they never did notice the crowd that had gathered at their sides.

No one asked anything as the paramedics worked feverishly on their father. Quickly, the paramedics loaded him onto a stretcher and desperately whisked him away, hastily before his blood congealed and his being was no more. The police officer from before looked at the four kids, their shapes round with the bulk of multiple clothing layers, their eyes dead and spent looking. It didn’t take a lot of thought for the police officer to realize that the children had been left to pick up the shards of something that had once made sense,

something that was once both proud and stern, but now lay servant to whatever pivotal extremity that pushed and pulled on the mind.

The streetlight's light crystallized on the front windshield of the car as they drove down the deserted streets that led to the hospital. No one said anything, as their bodies remained tense, even in the warm car they refused to relax. Each of them could feel the sweat rapidly beading under multiple layers of clothing. It all added up to dizziness and confusion. Was the sweat from warmth or nervousness? What was happening?

The police officer that drove tried in vain to coax any information out of the children as they continued on. No one's mouth was moving, no offerings of why they were in the situation that they were in, why they were following an ambulance that carried what was left of their father.

They were all numb. From all that lead up to the event, of months of growing agitation, it all seemed anticlimactic. They always thought deep down that their father would go out with a bang, something that would shake the foundations of their house and rock the neighborhood. But they didn't expect this, the whimper that their father had left them with. It was almost like he'd taken his opportunity and ran with it, to do as little damage as humanely possible, to blend in with something that was bigger and stormier than he was. To die on his own, alone, without any people getting caught up in the damage of the disease that made him so.

Over the police radio, another voice came over, a confirming voice that said that the children's mother was also en route to the hospital, how she had been found at home, alone on the front stair, staring out much like her husband had done, mumbling about where everyone had gone. She had been paralyzed by fear more than the cold, thinking that everyone had gone out in that big bang that the whole family had feared. But now, as she accompanied another police officer to the hospital, the children all felt a little sense of relief.

At least there was someone else to help them pick up the remaining pieces that they all had to share.